

Washington, DC – Today, the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC), along with the House Fine Arts Board, the Committee on House Administration, and the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans, celebrated the unveiling of the official portrait of the late Congressman Dalip Singh Saund, the first Asian American to serve in the United States Congress. The following is the text of the speech of Congressman Mike Honda (CA-15), Chair of CAPAC, as prepared for delivery:

“Today, we are making history by inducting the portrait of Congressman Dalip Singh Saund, the first Asian American member of Congress, into the Capitol. I am honored to be here with the family and friends of the Honorable Dalip Singh Saund, the portrait artist, Jon Friedman, and our distinguished members of Congress.&nbsp; I want to thank the Speaker, my colleagues from the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans, and the House Administration Committee for working to put this momentous occasion together.

“This portrait unveiling is especially timely since today is the start of the Festival of Lights otherwise known as ‘Diwali’ and this week the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program launched an exploratory phase for the Indian American exhibition at the Smithsonian known as ‘Home spun.’ I want to commend Franklin Odo, the Director of the APA Program.

“Saund’s life and career was about making possibilities. This trailblazing Congressman was a passionate advocate for the full and equal rights of his fellow Indian Americans while also being a successful legislator, elected three times by the people of his rural district. Although Saund’s district had almost no Asian Americans, he never once believed that he had to make a choice between representing his constituents or his community. Saund knew that they indeed come hand in hand.

“Saund entered the society of the early ‘20’s — a time when anti-immigrant bills were pouring out of state and federal legislatures at a furious pace.&nbsp; During this time, the law noted that Asian Indians could not be U.S. Citizens and his American wife lost her citizenship when she married him. In the ‘40s, Saund formed the Indian Association of America to help amend American immigration laws to make Asian Indians eligible for citizenship. His efforts paid off when President Harry S. Truman signed the Luce-Cellar Act in 1946, which permitted citizenship to Asian Indians.&nbsp;

“Saund’s legacy lives because even as he represented his constituents, he never forgot that he was also a voice for his culture and the South Asian community. Because of his consciousness and advocacy on behalf of the Asian American community, he broke down barriers through the Luce-Cellar Act, and provided the way for the millions of future Asian Americans to participate politically as citizens in this country. Because of his consciousness, he understood that political office offers a unique opportunity to reach out to and engage the Asian American community in a national dialogue.

“We live in a country that prides itself on embracing diversity and our ethnic heritage. Yet our history shows that this hasn’t always been the case. We have seen our limited English proficient immigrant communities left behind in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina due to poor access to disaster relief services. We have seen our Sikh community racially targeted in the aftermath of 9/11. We have seen our communities fall behind with a lack of quality healthcare and education.

“Although our country has made big strides in embracing diversity, we see that there is much work that still needs to be done. And that is why we need policymakers from our ethnic communities to represent our diverse voices.&nbsp;Saund did just that. Today, Saund continues to inspire South Asian elected officials who are committed to representing both their constituents and their community.&nbsp;These include Kumar Barve who is the current Majority Leader of the Maryland House of Delegates, Satveer Chaundhary who is the state Senator in Minnesota, and Upendra Chivukula who is the first Indian-American elected to the New Jersey state legislature.

“Today, we honor Congressman Dalip Singh Saund as we celebrate his portrait in the United States Capitol and remember the legacy of this American pioneer.”